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## ST. PAUL AND THE CHURCH IDEA

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At the outset we put four questions to ourselves: What is revelation? What is law? What is salvation? What is the word of God and what the nature of the society that administers the divine word to the needs of mankind? The first and the fourth questions are the most decisive. What is revelation? How does the innermost reality speak home to our hearts? How does the soul of things implant in us a confidence as deep as our being? This is the meaning of the first question. And now we ask, How is the divine revelation administered?

Our Lord founded a new kind of community, a fellowship whose vital breath was the gospel, the gladdening and convincing news concerning the Kingdom of God. Through his life and death and resurrection he infused saving conviction on this point into the blood of those who believed in him and gave their life-plan into his keeping.

The outpouring of the Spirit on Whitsunday made the person of Christ inseparable from the being of God. The creative unity of God interfused with the personal being and work of Jesus—this is the essence of the creeds. It is the function of personality in all its forms to convert problems into trysting-places between the seen and the unseen. The life of Christ is the final illustration of this law. By revealing the fatherhood of God within the deepest needs of man he converted the supreme moral problem, the Kingdom of God, into the meeting-place between the divine and the human. When the belief in this kingdom becomes a compelling conviction, then and not till then is man truly saved.

The new religion carried prophetism to its final position. The first Christian sermons (Acts 2:14-21) voiced the Christian's experience and message. The prophecy of Joel (3:1-5) is fulfilled. The invigorating and regenerating spirit is poured out on every member of the community, from the least to the greatest. Even the old men,

weighed down with the burden of years and disillusionment, even they see the glorifying vision.

Under the mental conditions of the time and place the belief in the masterhood of Jesus which inspired this prophetic teaching issued inevitably in the conviction that he would soon return to rule the world in righteousness. This belief became a fixed mental illusion in which all shared. But this intellectual error was the psychological consequence of the most magnificent outburst of moral and spiritual enthusiasm the world has ever seen.

The belief in the immediate insetting of divine perfection into human nature was so absorbing, it brought the "far-off divine event" so near, that consciousness gave way to ecstasy. This seems to be the essential meaning of the extraordinary event called "speaking with tongues." The supreme object of human desire was so overwhelmingly real that common-sense, taking wings, became vision, while every-day speech was exalted into the inarticulate.

Here, then, at the birth of the church, the distinguishing quality of our religion shines out clearly. It is this. Man's need of God and his need of his fellow-man become a single and indivisible need. Man's hunger and thirst for God can only be permanently satisfied within the bounds of an inclusive fellowship. The church's long life, her varied organization, her ennobling and entangling alliances with the forces of history, her fine yet perilous insistence on orthodoxy or straight thinking about the deepest meaning and the final issues of things, may confuse us on the question of her fundamental function. For it is a law of history, as certain as the law of gravitation, that the means long used to serve an end become in course of time an end in themselves. So the machinery of the church is very apt to identify itself with the essential nature of the church. But in the light of Whitsunday the fundamental significance of the church idea is plain. The church of Christ exists to bring the Kingdom of God down out of the clouds, to make belief in it a controlling force in human affairs.

In her first years the church was inevitably Jewish both in feeling and in framework. To convert the Jewish nation to Christ was an imperious necessity. Without this the reign of the Savior seemed unthinkable. The forms of thought were therefore Jewish. But the soul of the new community was infinitely greater than Judaism. It

was that power of the living God—made intimate with everyday life by the life of Christ—which exalts men of all sorts and conditions above their inheritance and their achievements, and so makes possible a comprehensive fellowship. Yet it remained for Paul to distinguish between the substance and the trappings, and so to found the Catholic church. Ranke has finely said that in the life of Alexander universal history is coextensive with biography. The remark may be applied here. The final turn in the history of our religion is identical with the life of a single individual.

Nothing but familiarity has prevented our seeing what an extraordinary thing it is that so considerable a part of the New Testament scriptures consists of letters. Real letters they are, too, not dogmatic monologues or personal musings. This is a unique fact in the constitution of "sacred books." It has no parallel. May we not venture to ask whether God could have indicated more clearly the meaning and the method of true revelation?

Of the fourteen letters attributed to Paul, Hebrews cannot possibly have been written by him, and the genuineness of the letters to Timothy and Titus is so seriously assailed that it is unsafe for us to use them in our study of the apostle's mind. But the letters beginning with I Thessalonians and ending with Ephesians constitute a wonderfully sensitive and expressive body of thought. It changes with the raw material of human nature and motive which it has to handle, yet a single conception is always in control. And in the end the church idea comes out into the open, clear and commanding. A better chance for laboratory work upon the nature of authority, as the Bible conceives it, could not be desired.

In I Thessalonians (2:14-16) the religious equality of Jew and gentile is assumed; and to that proposition the apostle devoted his life. It is often said that there is an emotional gulf between the Thessalonian and Roman letters. This deep difference, however, is only an appearance. And the appearance is due to a one-sided Protestantism which takes the doctrine of justification by faith out of its Pauline context, making it serve an individualistic conception of salvation. But that supreme truth, in St. Paul's thinking, is the soul within the body of experience which makes possible a universal society and fellowship.

In the Corinthian, Galatian, and Roman letters we find Paul fighting at close quarters with Judaizing Christianity. Now the main fault of Judaism was that it put the Bible-scholar and churchman in the place of the prophet. But Christianity in its essence was the completion of prophetism. Hence Paul found himself in irrepressible conflict with Jewish institutionalism. For Judaism, like all forms of infallibleism, built itself up on the belief in a revelation finished and closed. As a result, it would fain have suppressed piercing criticism of the Establishment. Could Judaizing Christianity have had its way, it would have quenched the creative spirit.

Thus brought under pressure, St. Paul carried the word "faith" to its ultimate position. His experience demonstrates the truth that this masterword of our religion cannot disclose its deepest meaning to him who thinks of nothing but the salvation of his own soul. To penetrate to its innermost resources we must start where the apostle started. We must follow the biblical conception of "righteousness" along its historical line of growth.

When the Catholic church established herself in clear separation from the heathen state and when, soon after, she monasticized herself, the two great terms "righteousness" and "justice" were doomed to run separate careers, justice being the ideal of the statesman and righteousness the ideal of the churchman. But the men of the Bible, like the men of Athens and of Rome, had a single term where we have two.

It is true that between Paul and Hebrew prophetism there had intervened a great religious movement that shifted the center of gravity from the nation to the individual. Moreover, his immense personality not only appropriated this individualizing tendency but strengthened it. None the less, when he approaches the problem of human perfection, he is on the prophetic line of advance. In no sense is he an individualistic modern. In his mind the personal and the organic aspects of life are instinctively related. Therefore his decisive question, How shall man attain righteousness and moral certitude? may be put in this way: How shall man secure perfect confidence regarding the attainment of personal and social perfection? The answer runs (Rom. 1:17; Hab. 2:4): Righteousness cometh of faith.

In our endeavor to bring this proposition to bear on our conception of the church, we must guard against two tendencies. We will take care not to be victimized by religious individualism, and we will see to it that the credal conception of faith does not dominate the prophetic conception. We will not, indeed, adopt the contemporary fashion of running down all corporate statements of belief. As students of history we know that the creeds have been indispensable forces making for clearness of thought and continuity of purpose. But credalism tends to become hostile or indifferent to vital propheticism. The consciousness of penetrating though unseen reality and that grand passion for the Kingdom of God which give the Christian religion the note of moral sublimity—these things constitute the prophetic view of the divine and human life. The creeds must serve that view, not obscure or enfeeble it.

Faith, in the Pauline sense, if separated from the body of divine promises given to the Hebrew prophets, becomes meaningless. "No matter how many are the promises of God, in Christ is found the affirmation of them all" (II Cor. 1:20). Faith and hope, being married to one another by God, cannot be divorced. Christians possess a "hope that does not put them to shame" (Rom. 5:5). The master-text (Rom. 8:24) suffices: "We Christians were saved for the great hope." Christ, when we put our plan of life into his keeping, takes human nature as his material and creates a new race. Christians are a folk dedicated and devoted to the supreme hope. God, in pure mercy and free grace, offers the Kingdom of God to the heart of man. Man makes, through trust in divine power and grace, a complete assent to God's offer. He grapples the great hope to his heart and is delivered (Rom. 8:15) from all his fears.

St. Paul did not write the Epistle to the Hebrews. But we may quote and paraphrase the words of that epistle (Heb. 11:1) as the best working definition of faith. "Faith is that divine power in man which gives body and reality to things hoped for and creates an irresistible conviction regarding things unseen." Through faith the gospel is revealed as God's power (Rom. 1:16; I Cor. 1:25), enabling man to realize the ideal of righteousness and right.

Once more we must remind ourselves that revelation is not an abstract process. On the contrary it is in the fullest sense a practical

process. Indeed, it is the sovereign form of the practical, the one force that can control and co-ordinate human experience. Its test and its issue are found in the foundation of a truly universal society. To the Hebrew prophets the divine unity disclosed itself as the ground of the nation's unity. To Paul—the typical Christian prophet—the divine unity, incarnated in the person of Christ, is equally, nay, even more, concrete. It is the base of human unity at large, the ground and root of an inclusive and comprehensive fellowship. It must, of course, be a religious fellowship, for nothing but the life of God in the soul can resist and overcome our inbred sin and selfishness and snobbery. But it is a true fellowship, making the unity of humanity the becoming and convincing evidence of a vital monotheism.

This is the center of gravity in Paul's thought. The supreme mystery is the existence of a society wherein both Jew and gentile, Greek and barbarian, cultured and ignorant are united (Rom. 11:25-36; Eph. 2:11, 3:12; Gal. 3:27-28; Col. 3:11). Long after Paul's day, when Christian prophetism was in deep decline and Greek philosophy in the ascendant, the center of gravity in the Christian's consciousness of mystery shifted. The sovereign mystery came to be the inner nature of God. A profoundly significant change! Men are distinguished by the things they wonder at. The philosophic reason, more concerned with problems of knowledge than with problems of life, strives to look into the inner being of God, and under the strain forgets or sidetracks the social question. But the prophetic reason knows of just one place where the inner being of God can be approached, namely in the deep of religious and social fellowship.

Protestants have long declared that the central article of belief, the article by which the church of Christ stands or falls, is justification by faith. If Protestants have nothing harder to do than to criticize the Roman Catholic church, this platform will serve. But if they have something far less luxurious, vastly more difficult to do, if they must realize the gospel, then for them and for Christians of all names the central and controlling article of faith is the belief in the religious and social unity of mankind. That is the test of the Christian church. That and nothing else is the fundamental function of the church when brought into contact and competition with other great organizing ideals like the state and nation.

The apostle criticized the Jewish church, his own mother-church, because it substituted orthodoxy and the pride of religious certitude for the moral passion of prophetism (Rom. 2:16-29). It canonized, as infallibleism invariably and inevitably does, things outgrown. It allowed the house-servant (Gal. 3:24) to dominate the creative spirit, the master of the house. It covered up moral incompetence with religious finality; so easy is it for a great religious establishment, possessing immense vested interests, to hide moral bankruptcy behind a majestic religious façade.

Human unity, is it thinkable? Is it believable? Living in the midst of a society honeycombed with snobbery, looking out on world-politics dominated by the tyranny of trade and the lust for power, can we, unless we would canonize the ostrich and escape from the enemies of conscience by hiding our heads under a bush, can we believe that human unity is possible? Is it not something we must be content to dream about? Were it not better to commend our problem to the angels? To satisfy ourselves with aspirations after sainthood? Let us, then, take the easier way. Let us enrich ourselves with religious certitude and imposing orthodoxies. But human unity! let it go until we get to heaven.

The great Apostle, however, found the proving-ground of the divine unity in human unity. Monotheism of any other sort is a notional thing, not a creative and organizing principle within consciousness. Paul's working ethics make this plain. When we first meet the Pauline trilogy (I Thess. 1:3) the sequence is Faith, Love, Hope. But when his thought has ripened, when he has learned that the local congregation is the battle-ground where the issues of vital monotheism must be fought out, then the order changes (I Cor. 13:13) and love, that is to say, the creative and organizing will of the people redeemed by the Lord, becomes the last word regarding knowledge and life.

Because the Jewish church could not be separated from the Jewish conception of the Holy Scriptures and of inspiration, the apostle was driven to criticize the canonic Old Testament. Resisting the attempt of Jewish Christianity to put the new wine in the old wineskins, he declared that the ritual and ceremonial elements of the Old Testament were no part of the abiding word of God. He described them



as spiritual rudiments, (Gal. 4:9) which the religion of the spirit had outgrown. Had he been using our language, he would have said that infallibleism in all its forms, scriptural and ecclesiastical alike, invariably sins against the spirit, by treating temporary positions as final and unchangeable positions.

But the full bearings of the church idea, the grounds of its supremacy amongst the organizing ideals of mankind, do not clearly come into light until the apostle's thought, colliding with Gnosticism, puts itself on record in the epistles to the Colossians and Ephesians. Gnosticism was a widespread and widely varied movement. There was, however, one fundamental quality common to all its forms. It was dualistic. Now dualism is the root heresy of all ages. And that is so because it is a frank confession of inability to believe that the divine power and meaning of things is a real presence on earth. The real world is held to be a world above and beyond this world. Only by asceticism and speculative mysticism can the redeemed man climb the ladder that carries the soul into the region where the full meanings of life are found. It is evident that the mass of men, chained to the task of living and keeping others alive, cannot climb this ladder. So, if Gnosticism be a true interpretation, it necessarily follows that the church, the society of those seeking salvation, must split in two. A small inner circle of people favored by nature and endowed with large leisure, may touch at first hand the saving reality. But for the mass of men there is no such possibility. So then, when the prophetic view of revelation goes out of consciousness, the unity of the church quickly follows.

Under the pressure of this heresy the apostle worked out the church idea. The church is the visible body of Christ (I Cor. 12:14; Rom. 12:5; Col. 1:18; Eph. 1:23). Her life is the saving embodiment of divine reality, the clear expression (*πλήρωμα*: Eph. 1:23) of the divine life that fills human life with meaning and value and promise.

Where lies the real world? How shall I possess a kind of knowledge from which reality does not shrink away, leaving me brain-sick and heart-sick? Where abides the divine heart of things? Whither runs the approach to it? How may I come into quickening touch with it? How shall I be saved from all my fears? our four questions reduce to a single question. And the prophet's answer runs, Not by

climbing the mystic's ladder! The man who, seeking the divine, turns absentee from history, hath left the divine behind him. In the deep of common need and fellowship, there and there alone the divine being and beauty shine clear. There and there alone can we secure a confidence that death and hell cannot shake.

The sum of our studies is this. The inspiring and informing power which gives the Scriptures their mastery amongst the world's sacred books is Hebrew and Christian prophetism. It is true that the Bible is not pure prophecy. The canonic Old Testament is the result of a compromise between the prophet and the Jewish churchman. Even in the New Testament we find a Pauline letter (I Tim.), not written by Paul, in which a catholic churchman deals in detail with the inevitable problems of discipline and government. But this only serves to place the Bible deeper in history. It also serves to bring out the truth that the Scriptures are a body of which the word of God is the soul. And the word of God, the word that saves and heals, is the spirit of prophecy and its incarnation, the Christ.

It is certain that the prophet himself knows nothing of infallibility. A superb experience of reality and a radiant certitude concerning supreme moral issues make him what he is. But certitude and infallibility are not the same thing. It is the churchman who has imposed upon the word of God the attribute of infallibility, and in so doing has imitated the contemporaries of Jesus who built the tombs of prophets dead and dulled their ears to prophets living.

What now is the relation between the Bible and the church? Down to the Reformation period, it was the established opinion that Bible and church constituted a single organism of saving truth. An infallible church administering an infallible Bible was the rule of life for the people who sought salvation. But the Reformation shattered this unity. The infallible Bible was used as siege artillery to batter down the walls of the infallible church. And now? Is not Protestantism learning and proving that the infallible Scriptures cannot act their part except on the stage of an infallible church? Do we not know that the doctrine of infallibility is an indivisible body of belief? The infallible church and the infallible Bible stand and fall together. From all sides the sound of their falling assails our ears.

But, when the doctrine of infallibility goes, the Protestant doctrine

of private judgment follows close after. It is as impossible as the infallible church. Indeed it is the existence of a church claiming infallibility in things spiritual which makes private judgment historically inevitable. When, however, the entire mental fabric of infallibility is pulled down, the historical excuse for the doctrine of private judgment is taken away. In science there is no such thing as private judgment. All reverent students of nature constitute a republic of free and humble explorers. In logic private judgment would be a monstrous chimera. The individual mind has no standing and no future except within the communion of all who strive to think straight and clear, and within whose thinking the saving necessities of thought are disclosed. Even so must it needs be in things spiritual and moral. Outside the living church, the corporate and continuous consciousness of redeemed humanity, there is no such thing as authority.

Outside the church is no salvation! A fateful, almost a fearful saying. But the terrible things done in its name are due to the church's mania for infallibility and to the resultant divorce between vital religion and magnificent morality. Let us, however, banish infallibility and individualism together. Then we will as soon think of going to Robinson Crusoe's island in quest of culture as think of seeking salvation and certitude outside the church.

Certitude—that is the key word. Questions regarding the sacraments and the ministry are settled beforehand by our views on certitude. Newman, seeking certitude in a world filled with pain and sin and doubt, reasons himself into the infallible church, while the prophet, holding his ground amongst a people of unclean lips, receives there, in the dust and heat of life, the inspiration of the living God, the touch of the fire from the altar of eternal life and hope, which cleanses his lips and fills him with irresistible conviction.

Certitude, spiritual and moral, can be given in but one way. In the deep of man's need of a sane and rightful and hopeful society the living God reveals himself. Out of the deep of this need we cry to God. And God answers our cry. Historical criticism is humanizing the Bible, making it at home in history. The social question, subjecting creeds and orthodoxy and churchmanship to a fiery moral judgment, is forcing Christians to ask whether they really and truly

believe in the Kingdom of God. Criticism and the social question together are slowly but surely shifting the center of gravity in our religion and our theology. Meditation on the inner being of God may easily become the most dangerous because the most respectable of untaxed luxuries. But meditation on the unity of humanity—here is a theme that thrills us like the sound of a trumpet. To grapple the Kingdom of God to the heart of man, to make the gospel as real as the sunshine and as widespread—here is a task and an inspiration that shall create in due time a new race of men.

The churches may seem to undo the church. But the church is within the churches. And just in proportion as we get back to the ground of living prophecy, where the word of God was first published and where it shall be published again, will the churches feel the ill-fitting robes of unreal authority slipping from them. Dooming themselves to a moral task transcending all human power and filled with the grace and power of God, the blessed art of keeping secondary things in their proper place will be given them. They will draw closer and closer together. And out of the midst of the churches the church idea will break forth upon men and women of high degree with compelling power and beauty.